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The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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THE FICKLE JADE INSPIRATION

A Unique Confession, and a Real Business Letter to a Writer.

ARE YOU the slave of inspiration, or its master? Is inspiration, after all, essential for the writer? These are questions that I found myself asking after a talk with a certain spinner of yarns, and it occurs to me that readers of *The Student-Writer* would be interested in eavesdropping at the conversation which set me to thinking.

The desire of this writer to remain incognito must be respected, but if I should mention his name you would undoubtedly recognize it. I had commented, rather enviously, on the apparently unfailing source of his inspiration: "You always seem to have plenty of ideas on tap for your next story. No danger of your ever running dry."

The writer was silent for a moment, then he gave a short laugh. "My dear fellow," he said, "I ran dry long ago."

I looked at him incredulously. Such a statement sounded very like affectation, coming from a man whose sales every year amounted to a most respectable figure, and whose output had a steadily increasing success.

He smiled at my expression. "That's the truth, whether you believe it or not. And as for inspiration, it has been so many years since I had any that I've almost forgotten the sensation. Almost, but not quite, for I used to have a great deal of faith in inspiration. You know what I mean. Ever so often an idea would burst upon me overwhelmingly and simply demand to be expressed. In a fever of creative zeal I would often stay all night at my desk and finish a long story at one sitting. If you like, I'll tell you how I was cured."

At my nod, he went on: "I wouldn't have you believe that I depended altogether upon the whims of inspiration. That is the last word in laziness, and I had not sunk quite so low. I was a firm believer in such copy-book maxims as, 'One-tenth inspiration and nine-tenths perspiration': 'Don't wait for inspiration, go after it with a club,' and so forth. Good maxims, only that they depend upon that necessary fraction of inspira-

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tion—which isn't always forthcoming, even when sought with a club. I have sat at my desk regularly, day after day, week after week, cudgeling my brains for an inspiration. When it finally came, I would write feverishly—and woe to anyone who had the temerity to interrupt while the divine afflatus was upon me. I lived the story, dreamt it, thought about nothing else until it was completed. My constant companion was a haunting fear that the story would 'go dead' on me before I could conclude it.

"Probably you understand what I mean by 'going dead.' A story begun in a fever of inspiration would commence after a while to lag—perhaps on account of some interruption, or perhaps for no reason save my own doubts. For once let an author begin to doubt the value of his inspiration or his ability to follow it out, and it's 'all off.' About three out of every four stories that I started would thus go dead, and nothing that I could do thereafter would bring them back to life. My path was strewn with such corpses. It almost seemed a miracle when I was able to finish a story without loss of interest.

"Some of these completed stories sold, others did not; for I never could tell whether the next idea that took hold of me was going to have commercial possibilities. In fact, it became a superstition with me that I could do my best work when I wrote with a fine disregard for sordid editorial opinion.

"I was full of such quaint conceits and superstitions. For instance, I firmly believed that if I told anyone the plot of a story on which I was engaged, the inspiration would evaporate—the story would go dead on me. I had proved this again and again (to my own satisfaction), yet the temptation to unfold my plot to some friendly ear was irresistible. A burst of confidence, and then—autosuggestion would get in its work. Result—another corpse.

"I suppose every writer is, or has been, subject to these freaks. Certain vague and impossible conditions must be met or Pegasus won't trot.

"Among other things was my conviction that the best food for inspiration was some form of anxiety. Thus, if a coal bill fell due which I was unable to pay, I could write grandly, gloriously—on some subject that was hampered by no sordid commercial possibilities. The fruit of a toothache, or of sickness in my family, or of a row with the sidewalk inspector was almost certain to be a completed story. There may have been something to this theory of drowning my troubles in creative effort; but the necessity for being continually in hot water in order that I might become a successful writer was rather harrowing to contemplate.

"Another of my unfortunate conceits was that inspiration, when it did come, was almost certain to time its arrival between midnight and 2 a.m. Such an untimely calling hour never did reconcile itself very well with the demands of family and business life.

"In spite of my erratic muse, I managed to turn out, in the aggregate, quite a lot of work, much of which eventually sold. My failures were principally unfinished manuscripts—the aforesaid numerous cadavers. Some years my sales amounted to but a few dollars; other years they mounted up into the hundreds.

"After ten years of this aimless puttering, my idea of becoming a successful writer, able to devote all my time to my chosen profession, had faded. I was pretty well disgusted. I saw that I was too 'temperamental' to depend upon writing. If the flour barrel needed filling, that was the very time when inspiration would prove the most balky or elusive.

"About this time I enjoyed the privilege of correspondence with a friend who had taken up literature as a hobby, although, as the head of

a big industry up in the Northwest, his income was larger than most writers can ever hope to attain. He admitted that, for his own satisfaction, he would like to prove that his writing was up to salable standard. I encouraged him to take himself seriously, gave him some practical advice (I was always full of good advice for others), and laid out a definite plan of work which he followed. Within six months he was placing all the stories he could find time to write.

"During this same period, my own work suffered a dreadful slump. The quality deteriorated so that my few sales were to cheaper markets than formerly, and the proportion of unfinished material was greater than ever. Facing the situation squarely (as I thought), I decided that I had acquired too much technique and that my critical faculty had smothered inspiration. That was it. No sooner did I get started on a good idea than technique jumped up and throttled it. The only cure, so far as I could see, was to yield myself wholly to the whims of inspiration, carefully avoiding the technicality that was so bent upon smothering my genius. No longer would I go after inspiration, even with a club. I would wait till she coaxed me to come and play with her. The idea of making a 'success' at writing was abandoned. The fact that I had not made good, after ten or twelve years of effort, proved that I would never be able to make story-writing my main occupation.

"Something of this nature I wrote to my friend, knowing that in him I should find a sympathetic ear. He would not fail me. He would say: 'By all means. You are doing the right thing. Your art is too sacred to be cheapened by sordid commercialism. Forget your technique and write as the mood seizes you.' So you may imagine the shock that was mine when I opened and read the harsh epistle that I will show you."

(The confession was interrupted that I might cast my eyes over this letter, which I have obtained permission to reproduce in full. I do so, feeling that it is a gem of its kind—a letter to a professional writer by a writer who is also a successful business man.)

Dear _____:

Here's where the pupil turns and disciplines the master. I haven't decided whether to tease, coax, taunt, or argue you into a decent frame of mind on the subject of writing, or to resort to the method of a very good friend of mine who deliberately starts in and makes me so mad that I rise up on my hind legs and show him that I can do the job. Then he sits back and laughs at me, and I know I've been buncoed again by a chap who knows how to handle me.

Anyway, I have been watching you for a year, with growing apprehension. Writing is your chosen business, your profession, the particular stunt in life for you. I'm a dub, a dilettante, a fellow who plays at writing, who looks on it as a hobby he'd like to ride. I've sold ten stories in the past year, largely because of the start you gave me. How many have you sold? Oh, I know my stuff is slush, sold to second-rate publications, and your last real sale, eighteen months ago, was to an exacting magazine. But why haven't you been selling four or five to one of mine?

Oh, you are young—lots of time; but take it from me, the years ahead of you will slip past at a pace that will make you gasp; and what are you going to have to show for it? A dozen stories and a book each year? You know more about writing than I ever can know. You can write, but I never shall be able to. You are an authority on technique.

Listen: I know a chap in New York, a chap whom I gave his chance in business a few years ago, and he made good fast and big. It looked

certain that he was passing me. His opportunities were exceedingly great and numerous. Two months ago he was fired off one of the high rungs of the ladder, and he had practically begged to be fired. That last feature is to his everlasting credit, and in it, I think, lies his salvation. It was the outcropping of the real stuff in him, that had been buried by a layer of dross, success which had smothered his ambitions and drugged his fighting spirit. He simply had lain down on the job, lost his interest, his impetus, his "pep," or whatever it is that keeps a man trying. I know the danger; it has come exceedingly close to me, and it is small credit to me that I heeded the warnings when I discovered myself. As a commercial proposition, don't you think you ought to be fired? Preachments? Yes; you've got them coming to you. The only reason you have stopped in your tracks is that you are unwilling to pay the price.

And a price it is, even if one would but indulge a whim. I get up at four every morning, including Sundays. I take a cold shower, shave, and dress, and go at it. Meantime a cup of coffee is brewing and I nibble a cake or a bit of toast as I work. At seven, I'm in my office, and writing is forgotten until four the next morning. I get in, with a certain amount of necessary chores, about two hours at a quiet time of day, but the price, especially after a social evening the night before, is heavy. Some day, perhaps, when Big Ben goes off, I'll rouse enough to call myself the fool I am, and I'll be cured forever of the writing fever. With you, it is your business, and there is no let-up. The occupation by which you now earn your living is merely the means to the end of literary success, the meal ticket during the "starvation period" which every professional man goes through. I don't care what it costs you, an hour or more every day can be managed, and I have a notion that, as in musical work, a short period of regular practice is worth a lot more than an occasional orgy of it.

Truisms? Sure—you taught them to me. What are you going to do about it? Of course you are full of big ideas of the things you'd like to write about. Who isn't? Literary mirages! The immediate surroundings are barren and unattractive? Of course. It takes vision to see things at hand in true perspective. Write to sell—you can do that, and it brings in the checks. Art will take care of itself in its own time and way. Write slush, as I do, if you must, but sell it. Use a *nom de plume* if you wish to keep clean for work that is to go down to fame, but write! I haven't any name to guard, so I use my own. And here's a secret: Little by little, I'm nearer, both in time and preparation, to those big stories which I'm going to write.

Once before, I wrote a protest, but did not mail it, against your attitude toward stories you have written, or partly written, that have failed—against your disinclination to consider them further. Why not? Are all ideas to be abandoned which have failed to receive your adequate handling? With me, a good idea sometimes tempts me into going off half-cocked. I know, or suspect, that the thing has failed, or I let an editor tell me so, but it seems to me that the idea is just as good as it was before I attempted to handle it, and I have the advantage of the experience in the first attempt. To be sure, a lot of enthusiasm over it is gone, but I'm saner, and more often, on a later attempt, can write a better or more salable story.

I grant the aversion for a story once you have lost your first enthusiasm over it; I also grant the point of view of your last letter, but I'd merely call it temperamental, and am not inclined to look on your difficulty with a great deal of sympathy, or as anything more than something to be shaken off, like the dregs of sleep one has to fight at four a.m. Admit the physical elements involved, the human frailty to be supported.

If necessary, resort to the simplest, even childlike, expedients to keep yourself at it. I have a lot of little stunts of my own for the same purpose. Concede the need, and resort to anything that will drive you to it. Shortly the particular difficulty will have passed.

Suppose you go home tonight, forget your soreness at my impudence in writing this letter, and draft—in a couple of hundred words—the best plot that occurs to you offhand; show the atmosphere, the characterization, the viewpoint, and the kick; and send it on to me by next mail. Let me tell you what I think of it—what seems good and what doesn't, and send it back. Then accept or disregard the suggestions, and write your story. Let me see it after it is finished. Take up a schedule, say of one finished story—in both senses—a month, and follow it, rain or shine, for better or for worse, or for any other conclusive reason that you choose. Forget for a time that the game is a highbrow profession and consider it a trade. Make your working room a shop, a mill, a factory, and not a "study" or a "studio," and grind out the stuff. Write to sell. Write!

There! How do you like it? I hope to thunder I've got your goat. I realize that in writing this I have laid myself wide open to all sorts of refutation, and of course you can argue most eloquently that I have missed the point entirely. But, hang it, get busy! That's what I'm trying to tell you. Quit your frittering around the margins of the point. Quit kidding yourself with theories, and WRITE SOME STORIES.

Sincerely your friend,

I handed back the letter. "A peach of a letter, but pretty strong medicine," I commented. "How did you take it?"

"Well—" the reply came with a laugh—"I think it rather stunned me. I read it over three times and presently began to wonder why I wasn't mad. I felt a sort of impersonal pity for myself. 'Yes, it's all true,' I said. 'Poor old me, I've lost my pep.'"

"That evening, I sat down and wrote my friend, assuring him of my confidence in his good intentions and thanking him, but reiterating, in long-winded phraseology, my determination not to write at all if I couldn't do something 'big' and inspired. You see, as yet I hadn't really assimilated the letter.

"A day or so after mailing my answer I began to see things differently. The letter had brushed a lot of cobwebs out of my brain, but still I wasn't ready to admit that they were gone. It began to sift into my consciousness that, so far as I was concerned, literature wasn't a sort of gift from the gods—something too choice for everyday use—it was merely my job, the thing for which I was better equipped than for anything else.

"The realization of this forever killed the inspiration in my work, but it also made me a writer—to whatever extent I now deserve that designation. It robbed literature of the glamour, the illusions, the sacred claptrap, but it gave back substantial realities. It made me realize that 'inspiration,' instead of being the essential which I had considered it, is the mirage of which the writer must beware if he would amount to anything. To use another figure, inspiration is a mental intoxicant. The writer who depends upon it is worse off than the toper who demands his regular glass of liquor before he considers himself in shape to meet the duties of the day. He is its slave, not its master, and would be better off if he had never learned to rely upon it.

"Before I had really formulated this common-sense philosophy, I determined that I would 'show' my friend that I wasn't the failure he hinted at. So I sat down to write one of those big stories, unhampered

by technique, that I had decided were to be my forte. Only—the story wouldn't come! There was I, depending on inspiration, and the faithless jade (you don't mind, do you, if I mix my figures?) had failed to keep her appointment. But she had trifled with me once too often. From that moment I made up my mind to get along without her. Out of my desk I drew the first chapters of a serial begun in high fever of enthusiasm sometime before, and then dropped because it had gone dead. As I thumbed over the pages, I felt not the least throb of reviving interest. It was hopelessly defunct—a fit subject on which to prove my determination. Inspiration would have turned up her nose at it in disgust.

"I read over the last page I had written, then put a fresh sheet of paper in my typewriter and started to carry the story forward. After writing about two thousand words, I began to feel a glow of renewed confidence in myself. No; inspiration had not returned; and if she had, I think I would have closed the door in her face. But I was proving that I could write—and fairly up to my standard at that—without feeling the least glow of creative fire. Nor was it hard work. In fact, the effort involved was hardly greater than that of reading a book. I merely said to myself: 'What shall I have happen next?' Then I took the best suggestion that came to mind and wrote it down. My language was anything but inspired. I allowed my critical faculty full sway and depended upon it alone. If it seemed to me that, in a certain place, a character should say something funny, I put into his mouth the nearest approach that I could think of to a joke. If a bit of description was needed, I manufactured some. If I reached a place where deep emotion should be manifested, I pulled out the emotional stop, as it were, and then, when it seemed that the reader's feelings had been sufficiently harrowed, I shut it off. Love scenes had always bothered me; now I found that they went as easily as anything else if I manufactured them in a cold-blooded, unfeeling state of mind. The point I am trying to make clear is that, personally, I had no feeling toward the story—no interest in the characters, no concern over the outcome. I have heard of writers who wept with their fictional characters—in fact, lived their lives. I used to do it myself, in the old days—but I do so no more. It is all calculation now. To me that story was dead and the characters were animated lay figures. By employing all the technical skill and knowledge of human nature that I possessed, I endeavored to make them seem as lifelike as possible. "This was not nearly such hard work as straining after inspiration. Nor yet was it that sort of creative work that carries itself along by its own momentum. It was just a mental occupation—a mild bore which I did not particularly mind, after becoming accustomed to it.

"But a strange thing about it is this: when I read over one of my own stories after it has grown cold, I get much the same pleasure that I do from reading another person's work. I have put so little of myself into it that it is like coming upon the work of a stranger. And, strangest of all, the characters seem to have come to life since I manufactured them. The very tricks which I worked out by cold calculation to convey the illusion of reality succeed so well that I myself am often moved to tears or laughter by a combination of words that were perfectly lifeless to me as I wrote them down.

"I finished that one serial and began another. Since then I have written many serials and short-stories, and the proportion of sales has been all to the good. I don't waste time on long chances—things that won't sell. Instead of decrying the poor taste of the editors, I play the game according to the rules I find in force. The old zest in writing is gone, it is true; but when I reflect how easy I take my work now, and look back upon the mental agony, the brain-cudgeling, and the doubts

and disappointments that used to attend my literary endeavors, I am well satisfied with the exchange. The first ten years of my chase for elusive inspiration now seem a sort of protracted nightmare.

"Of course I take a certain interest in my work—the same interest that a carpenter takes in building a house, or that my wife takes in skillfully knitting a sweater for a soldier. I want to make a good, workmanlike job of it, and the sense of accomplishment pleases me; but there is no uncertainty about the outcome. I can turn from one story to another, or I can drop a composition at any point and take it up later with no more effort or loss of time than would be involved in any other job. If I find myself actually laboring over a story, or going to the opposite extreme and getting excited over it, I take myself in hand and check the tendency. There should be nothing hard in telling a story, if one doesn't try to build overrapidly; and too much zest of creation is sure to be followed by a reaction.

"I sometimes wonder if I am not the most independent writer alive. I am not dependent on inspiration, for I've long refused admission to her, and get along without her very well indeed. I am free from the fear which every writer probably knows at some time—that I may be 'written out'; that I shall 'go dry.' This can't bother me, because I wrote myself out long ago, and now I don't have to wait for an idea to come—I merely sit down at my desk and manufacture one. Of course, technical knowledge and experience are necessary in order to do this; but I have acquired these, and you can't take them away from me short of operating on my brain centers.

"Commercial? Yes, undoubtedly. But the peculiar thing about it is that my stories are improving. I'm becoming a better workman. It's just as my good friend implied in his letter; write the story that comes to hand, and the big story will come of itself when you have grown to it."

So ended the confession. The writer who had made it rose and walked to the window, where he stood looking out, while I regarded him rather blankly. Some of my own mental cobwebs had, perhaps, been brushed away by his story. "But surely," I said, "you wouldn't apply this to everybody. You must acknowledge that inspiration has its place."

"No doubt," he acknowledged, without turning. "Inspiration is a nice thing for dilettantes and beginners. For the real writer—that is, the man or woman who makes literature a profession and not a hobby or an affectation—it is useless junk, a mere excuse for laziness. The test of a writer is, whether he can turn out work under any and all circumstances, and without a severe strain upon himself; that, and willingness to pay the price, which includes the necessary period of apprenticeship. I've proved it, after coming as near as any man ever did to total failure."

Do you wonder, readers of The Student-Writer, that this con-

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versation left me with conflicting emotions? I have presented the story of this writer, as nearly as I can remember it, without additional comment or advice. But I wonder—has inspiration, after all, been accorded too high a place in the requirements of genius? Or is there, perhaps, a higher form of inspiration that comes when we cease to seek for it? In the *Bhagavad-Gita*, I think, it is written that, "the man who is not calm and subdued, or whose mind is not at rest, can never obtain the Self, even by knowledge." Is the Self here mentioned the seat of true inspiration, and may we find it by refusing to yield ourselves up to the fine frenzies of creative zeal—if we are content to write what is nearest at hand, to think of literature as a job rather than as an exalted calling? —W. E. H.

It is a peculiar coincidence that, after recording the above conversation, I should have picked up *The American Magazine* for October and found therein a strikingly parallel confession in the leading article, by Mary Roberts Rinehart, from which I quote.—W. E. H.

"Things have a way of working out for good, after all. For after a time—but it was a long time—I learned to work when the chance came. The total result of this, after twelve years, is that I have learned to sit down at my desk and begin work simultaneously. One thing died, however, in these years of readjustment and struggle: That was my belief in what is called 'inspiration.' I think I had it now and then in those days, moments when I felt things I had hardly words for, a breath of something much bigger than I was, a little lift in the veil. It does not come any more. . . . In those first early days I seemed to have so many things to write about, and writing was so difficult. Ideas came, but no words to clothe them. Now, when writing is easy, when the technic of my work bothers me no more than the pen I write with, I have less to say. I have words, but fewer ideas to clothe in them. And, coming more and more often is the feeling that, before I have commenced to do real work, I am written out. . . . The truth is, my critical powers have grown faster than my creative ones. . . . Yet I go on writing."

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